

# **DEVELOPMENT OF A STRATEGY FOR CONFLICT MANAGEMENT DURING FIRE/EMS DEPARTMENT AMALGAMATION**

## **EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this research was to develop a strategy for the management of conflict between Fire and EMS personnel in the Edmonton Emergency Response Department. The research was undertaken employing both an historical research methodology and an action research methodology. Document analysis and interviews were used to gain an understanding of the premerger motives. Management literature on amalgamation (mergers and acquisitions) and on theories of conflict management was examined in order to develop an organizational strategy to provide direction in the development of a specific set of guidelines or tools that may be used by managers to resolve or diffuse situations where conflict negatively affected organizational performance. The following research questions were pursued

1. What insights can management literature or research provide regarding the amalgamation of two organizations and the underlying reasons for conflict?
2. What methods or strategies for conflict resolution and conflict management are described in the management literature?
3. Which of the theories or models described in the literature can be adapted to the emergency response industry in order to provide a framework for conflict management in the Edmonton Emergency Response Department?
4. What organizational strategies should be pursued in order to facilitate the amalgamation process and assist managers in their role as conflict managers and dispute resolvers?

Through the literature search conducted in this project, articles were discovered in the mergers and acquisitions literature and in the conflict management literature that provided insight and understanding into the problems associated with managing a merger in a large organization. Based on propositions found in the mergers and acquisitions literature, several recommendations were made regarding the manner by which the merger of fire and EMS organizations can be managed effectively. In the present case, as in others discussed in the literature, premerger discussions focused on the strategic aspects of amalgamation rather than on the organizational elements. The lesson for other organizations is to carefully consider the "human side" of the merger and provide training and direction to employees throughout the organization so that they are prepared to face the types of human resource problems that are inevitable in any merger. Another recommendation that was drawn from the mergers and acquisitions literature and the present case was the need to explicitly clarify whether the amalgamation is a merger or an acquisition, and to provide employees with clear direction and reliable information concerning what is going to happen and why it is going to happen.

Specific recommendations were also drawn from the conflict management literature. In terms of the Edmonton Emergency Response Department specifically, it was recommended that the step-by-step conflict management process developed by Carpenter and Kennedy (1988) be reviewed by the ERD Academy and developed into a customized training program for District Chiefs and EMS Supervisors. Finally, the development of a strategy for conflict resolution for line managers was deemed to be contingent upon the senior management providing the vision, mission, and leadership that is required to ensure that the merger leads to the realization of the economies of scale and improved service to the public that were anticipated through the merger.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
Abstract .....	117
Table of Contents .....	119
Introduction .....	121
Background and Significance .....	122
Literature Review .....	124
Procedures .....	130
Results .....	131
Discussion .....	135
Recommendations .....	137
References .....	141
Appendix A .....	145
Appendix B .....	149
Appendix C .....	155



## INTRODUCTION

In Edmonton, Canada, a directive was proclaimed by City Council to amalgamate the Fire Department and Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Department into the Emergency Response Department. The amalgamation was to commence January 1, 1994, and was scheduled to be phased in over a three-year period. The amalgamation involved the blending of the two administrations, and the co-location of some fire units and EMS units, while maintaining two separate operating branches. The maintenance of separate operating branches was promoted by the existence of two distinct labor organizations, both of which expressed an unwillingness to amalgamate. The amalgamation of the administration, and the co-location of operations personnel, resulted in many conflict situations which compromised or potentially compromised service delivery. The potentially negative effects of conflict highlighted the need to develop a strategy for conflict management.

The purpose of this research was to develop a strategy for the management of conflict between Fire and EMS personnel in the Edmonton Emergency Response Department. The research was undertaken employing both an historical research methodology and an action research methodology. Document analysis and interviews were used to gain an understanding of the premerger motives. Management literature on amalgamation (mergers and acquisitions) and on theories of conflict management was examined in order to develop an organizational strategy to provide direction in the development of a specific set of guidelines or tools that may be used by managers to resolve or diffuse situations where conflict negatively affected organizational performance. The following research questions were pursued

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## **BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE**

Continually shrinking budgets and public demands for increased cost-effectiveness in the delivery of emergency services has caused many municipalities to consider the amalgamation of the Fire Department and the Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Department. While improved service to the public is ultimately the rationale for such amalgamation, service delivery can potentially be compromised when conflict arises among staff members from different departments. Differing task demands, differing organizational configurations, and differing organizational cultures of fire and EMS departments make the possibility of conflict inevitable. For managers who are involved in combining fire and EMS services, the development of a strategy for conflict management is necessary to facilitate the amalgamation process and to minimize the negative effects of conflict.

The amalgamation that took place in Edmonton was prompted by a belief by City Council that service delivery could be enhanced, and could be provided in a more cost-effective manner by combining the two departments. This view was shared by the city manager and the department general manager (fire chief). The amalgamated department was organized in such a way that many support functions were centralized, and staff reductions were realized in areas where overlaps existed. Administrative functions such as Communications, Human Resources Management, Payroll, Finance, Accounting, and Purchasing were amalgamated. Support services functions such as vehicle maintenance, training and development, and property administration were also amalgamated. The operational components of the organization, however, remained as two distinct branches: the EMS branch and the Fire/Rescue Branch (see organizational chart, Appendix A).

There were several differences in the two operating branches in terms of task demands, organizational configuration, and organizational culture. The Fire/Rescue Branch used a station-based method of deployment, where firefighters were assigned to stations and worked regular tours of duty in specific stations. The EMS Branch, on the other hand, used a system of roving deployment in which EMS units were moved to various locations around the city depending on call volume and unit availability (system status management). These different deployment methodologies perpetuated two different work environments and organizational cultures, and created the potential for conflict between the two groups.

As part of the amalgamation strategy, firefighters were given enhanced training for medical response, and several pumper units were equipped with Automatic External Defibrillators (AEDs). The increased role of firefighters in providing emergency medical services represented a change in the traditional delineation of tasks between firefighters and EMS providers. A philosophy of continuity of care was adopted which necessitated the firefighters working closely with the EMS staff to ensure that the best possible care was provided to patients. These new strategies for task accomplishment created many situations for potential conflict to exist.



The two branches also had differing rank structures. The Fire/Rescue Branch had firefighters, lieutenants, captains, and district chiefs, all of whom were in a single bargaining unit, and deputy chiefs who were classified as management employees. Every fire station was run by a captain, and every fire/rescue unit had an officer (captain or lieutenant) assigned to it. The EMS Branch on the other hand had EMTs and paramedics in one bargaining unit, and supervisors who were classified as management employees. EMS units were not staffed with officers, and only one supervisor was on duty in the city at a given time. This difference in rank structures often created unclear areas of responsibility and potential for conflict.

The responsibility for managing the operations and resolving day-to-day problems and conflicts was given to the EMS supervisors and Fire/Rescue district chiefs. They were encouraged to deal with problems in a collaborative manner and to resolve problems as quickly as possible in order to avoid having small problems turn into large problems. Basic guidelines for conflict resolution were circulated to all stations, but little direction or training was given to those who were expected to work within the guidelines.

Many conflict situations arose over the first several months of the amalgamation. Common themes included complaints from EMS personnel that fire/rescue personnel were hostile and/or sexist in their behavior in stations; complaints from fire/rescue personnel that EMS personnel provided incompetent and/or inappropriate patient care at calls; complaints from EMS personnel that fire/rescue personnel tampered with station alerting systems; complaints from fire/rescue personnel that EMS personnel avoided station work and neglected duties.

While station officers, district chiefs, and EMS supervisors were given the responsibility for collaboratively resolving these types of disputes, they were not given any training or provided with any clear directives as to conflict resolution strategies or techniques. These managers made many attempts to resolve conflicts as they arose; however, it became apparent to senior management that a systematic approach, which was grounded in well proven theory, was necessary in order to provide managers with more specific direction and a consistent approach. This research project was conceived with that objective in mind.

This research project addresses the issue of organizational change, which is an issue that is analyzed in the *Executive Development* course at the National Fire Academy. Conflict between individuals and groups of individuals is often a byproduct of organizational change. It is anticipated that the conflict resolution strategy developed for managers in the Edmonton Emergency Response Department can be generalized for use in other departments, and will be useful for other managers faced with amalgamation, conflict, and organizational change.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review for this project involved the examination of literature pertaining to three distinct subject areas. First, management literature was reviewed as it pertains to corporate mergers and acquisitions. The literature was examined in order to seek guidance as to the occurrence of organizational conflict in other organizations that experienced mergers. Secondly, management literature was reviewed as it pertains to organizational conflict, conflict management, and conflict resolution. This literature was examined in search of specific guidelines for developing a conflict management strategy. Finally, fire service and emergency medical services literature was reviewed in order to ascertain whether other jurisdictions are pursuing amalgamation of fire and emergency medical services, and whether other jurisdictions have experienced conflict.

### Mergers and Acquisitions

The management literature on corporate mergers is extensive. Several authors note that mergers and acquisitions became a wide-spread phenomenon in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and are likely to continue in the coming years (Greenwood *et al.*, 1994; Morgan, 1988). It has been estimated that, by the year 2000, one in four U.S. firms will have been involved in a merger (Fulmer, 1986). Corporate merger is used as a strategy to achieve corporate growth, economies of scale, vertical integration, and diversification (Buono *et al.*, 1985). The frequency of mergers and acquisitions in recent years has drawn much attention from researchers, and many different aspects of mergers have been examined.

Early research on mergers and acquisitions (Allen *et al.*, 1981; Davidson, 1988) focused on the strategic, financial, and operational outcomes of mergers (Buono *et al.*, 1985). It was discovered through this research, however, that many mergers that made sense from a strategic, financial, and/or operational point of view often failed to produce the outcomes expected. The reasons for these failures were investigated in later research, which explored the importance of organizational culture and the "human side" of mergers (Buono *et al.*, 1985; Napier, 1988; Buono and Bowditch, 1989; Greenwood *et al.*, 1994; Olie, 1994).

Greenwood *et al.* (1994) provide a review of the literature on the human side of mergers and suggest that two major themes may be drawn from the literature: (1) mergers almost inevitably create behavioral difficulties and a myriad of people-related problems (Greenwood *et al.*, 1994:239); and (2) managers usually under-manage the planning and implementation of mergers (Greenwood *et al.*, 1994:240). The under-management of mergers, they suggest, is due to two factors: an insufficient sensitivity to potential difficulties; and the inherent dynamics of the merger process (Greenwood *et al.*, 1994:240). They argue that in the early stages of merger discussions, or in the "courtship stage," the focus tends to be almost exclusively on issues of strategic fit, with little consideration for issues of organizational fit. Organizational fit is described

with little consideration for issues of organizational fit. Organizational fit is described as concerning organizational design which includes structure, decisions processes, and culture (Greenwood *et al.*, 1994:241). It is suggested that organizational design issues are typically not fully considered at the courtship stage, and become problematic at the implementation or "consummation" stage (Greenwood *et al.*, 1994).

Another theme in the management literature on mergers and acquisitions which has relevance to the issue of fire/EMS amalgamation is defining the differences between mergers and acquisitions, and possible outcomes of each process. Brown, Greenwood, and Hinings (1990) suggest that a merger involves a blending or fusing of two organizations. An acquisition, on the other hand, involves a legal ajoinment or absorbtion of one organization into another. Brown *et al.* (1990) suggest that most of the case studies in the literature which profess to deal with mergers do, in fact, deal with acquisitions. Case studies which deal specifically with mergers, in the pure sense, include Schweiger and Denisi (1991), and Greenwood *et al.* (1994). The distinction between mergers and acquisitions is important in that many problems which arose in the Edmonton amalgamation pertained to differing perceptions as to whether the amalgamation was a merger or an acquisition.

When analyzing mergers it is important to recognize that there are different organizational aspects that may or may not be included in a merger. Shirvasta (1986) suggests that mergers may involve three different levels of integration: procedural, physical, and managerial. Procedural pertains to the extent to which the merged organization develops standardized policies and procedures relating to the daily functioning of the organization. Physical pertains to the office and production or operating facilities, and the extent to which these will be centralized and combined in the merged organization. Managerial pertains to the extent to which the merged organization operates under a unified set of values or culture. This distinction is useful in analyzing fire/EMS mergers in that different levels of integration may be pursued in different jurisdictions. In Edmonton the merger was only partial on each of the three levels.

In considering the possible outcomes of the joining of two organizations, Nahavandi and Malekzadeh (1988) suggested that four different cultural processes may occur: (1) integration--employees of an acquired organization try to maintain many of the basic assumptions, beliefs, and practices that make them unique; (2) assimilation--one group willingly adopts the identity and culture of the other; (3) separation--the two groups preserve separate cultures and practices; and (4) deculturation--members of an acquired organization neither adopt the acquiring organization's culture nor attempt to preserve their separate culture.

In reviewing these four acculturation outcomes proposed by Nahavandi and Malekzadeh (1988), Greenwood *et al.* (1994) suggest that these four possible outcomes pertain to acquisitions. They suggest that in the case of a merger a fifth option exists which is that of a "blended culture" in which the merging organizations

attempt to adopt the strengths of each of the merging cultures. These five possible types of cultures which can result from mergers and acquisitions help to characterize and explain the outcomes of mergers and acquisitions. What is relatively untouched in the literature, however, is the processes by which these outcomes are achieved. Obviously the intention of the architects of any merger would be to create a blended organization in which the strengths of each of the constituent cultures are captured in the merged culture. What happens, however, when, for example, management expects employees to adopt new practices from the other firm, and the employees refuse? This issue does not appear to be addressed in the mergers and acquisitions literature, as most previous research adopts a descriptive rather than prescriptive posture.

In one of the few articles that does consider managerial practices, Olie (1994) suggest that leadership, the symbolic reconstruction of a new identity, superordinate goals, and the creation of multigroup memberships, are managerial strategies which may serve to reinforce a successful integration process. Through the presentation of three case studies of international mergers, Olie (1994) illustrates that leadership, appropriate organizational structure, and the compatibility of merger motives may be seen as important facilitators in organizational mergers.

A second article which discusses managerial strategies is that of Schweiger and Denisi (1991). They suggest that a managerial strategy that includes realistic merger previews and realistic communications can substantially decrease the problems experienced during a merger. Their theory is borne out through a longitudinal case study, which examined a merger wherein their technique was employed.

Aside from these specific managerial strategies proposed by Olie (1994), and Schweiger and Denisi (1991), the mergers and acquisitions literature is relatively silent on the issue of effectively managing the merger process. Greenwood *et al.* (1994) note that a recurrent theme in the literature is the inevitability of problems and conflict. While some attention in the literature is focused on designing mergers to minimize conflict, little direction is provided as to the effective management of unforeseeable and unavoidable conflicts that arise through the merger process. In order to seek direction in this regard we now turn our attention to a different theme in the management literature, in search of specific direction regarding the management of interpersonal and organizational conflict.

## **Conflict and Conflict Management**

In the early days of management research and theorizing, conflict was viewed as a negative and undesirable aspect of organizational life (Robbins, 1978). Research and managerial practice focused on the avoidance of conflict and on conflict resolution (Robbins, 1978). More recently, it has been accepted that conflict is somewhat inevitable and is not always or necessarily bad for an organization. Conflict can lead to the development of ideas that would not otherwise be developed, it can provide stimulation and activity, and it can create internal cohesiveness among groups

(Thomas, 1976). The key for organizational success is to recognize and manage conflict for the good of the organization, rather than to simply avoid conflict or resolve it.

Pondy (1967) developed a model by which to analyze conflict processes and conflict outcomes by treating them as elements of a "conflict episode." Pondy (1967) theorized conflict episodes as having five distinct stages: (1) antecedent conditions; (2) latent conflict; (3) perceived conflict; (4) manifest conflict; and (5) conflict aftermath. Pondy proposed that the primary antecedent conditions in organizations involved competition over scarce resources, individual or subunit efforts to achieve independence, and differences among goals held by different individuals and/or different subunits.

A comprehensive review of Pondy's model, and various other models of conflict and conflict resolution is provided by Lewicki, Weiss, and Lewin (1992). They reviewed 44 major models of conflict encompassing 3 general research areas: conflict; negotiation; and third-party behavior. All three of these areas of conflict research, they suggest, contain two different approaches: **descriptive**, which addresses the causes and dynamics of conflict; and **normative**, which takes a prescriptive approach to conflict, stressing cooperation and collaboration (Lewicki *et al.*, 1992:217). Lewicki *et al.* (1992) complain that many models of conflict and conflict resolution are based more in theory than in empirical research, and they call for future research to be more systematic and focus on the empirical validation of theory.

In responding to the criticisms of Lewicki *et al.* (1992), and building on the work of Sheppard (1984), Elangovan (1995) proposes a prescriptive model for managerial third-party dispute intervention. Elangovan acknowledges that much of the research on mediation and dispute resolution pertains to situations where third-party mediators or arbitrators are brought in from outside the organization. While situations that require the intervention of an outside third party are typically major and/or enduring organizational issues, managers routinely intervene in minor or less visible intra-organizational disputes. The ongoing management of day-to-day issues by managers ostensibly prevents escalation from occurring and potentially eliminates the need for outside intervention.

While Elangovan's approach is intended to provide specific guidance to managers concerning how they should intervene in a particular dispute situation, his intention is clearly not to eliminate conflict, but rather to manage it:

...managed properly conflict may enhance organizational performance by challenging the status quo, serving as a medium for airing problems, fostering creativity and innovative problem solving, promoting reassessment of unit goals and activities, increasing the probability that the unit will respond to change, and leading to improved organizational policies and operations (Elangovan, 1995:4).

The model Elangovan (1995) develops is intended to deal with specific "dispute episodes," and makes three assumptions concerning a manager's ability to intervene in disputes: (1) it is assumed that managers have authority over subordinates and thus are entitled to intervene in disputes; (2) it is assumed that relative to subordinates, managers who are in positions to resolve disputes among subordinates have a better understanding of the goals and activities of the organization; and (3) it is assumed that managers are committed to the best interests of the organization before personal or subunit goals, and therefore will attempt to maximize organizational effectiveness (Elangovan, 1995:7,8). Elangovan sets out five distinct criteria in the theoretical development of this model which may be paraphrased as follows:

(1) criteria for successful dispute resolution; (2) a set of distinct intervention strategies that managers can employ to resolve disputes; (3) the major attributes of disputes that determine the success of intervention strategies; (4) a set of rules based on effects of key dispute attributes; and (5) a parsimonious and easy-to-use model that combines the previous four components (Elangovan, 1995:8).

Successful dispute resolution is defined as meeting three specific criteria:

(a) the issues are fully addressed to produce a settlement consistent with organizational objectives; (b) the resolution is timely; and (c) the disputants are committed to the resolution (Elangovan, 1995:11).

Intervention strategies, it is proposed, can vary in two different dimensions, outcome control, and process control. When represented on a graph, the two dimensions can be seen to create five different combinations positioned at the four corners and the center of the graph. These five different positions on the graph represent five different dispute resolution strategies which are employed in Elangovan's model (see Appendix B for a detailed description).

Although Elangovan's model is proposed as being prescriptive and practical, the theoretical discussions and explanations that are presented to develop the model are lengthy and complex. It is highly questionable as to whether this model would have practical applicability in the Edmonton ERD. The decision tree is presented as a tool that managers can use to select an approach to conflict resolution, but the process of following the decision tree requires that managers would have to understand the theory and logic which underlie the model. This could be extremely challenging given the highly academic and abstract nature of the theory.

Two other resources were discovered which have a more practical and common-sense approach to conflict management. In Learning from conflict: A handbook for trainers and group leaders, Hart (1987) provides a practical approach to understanding and managing conflict. Hart (1987) outlines a number of specific exercises that can be designed to train people to analyze their personal values and

assumptions and to recognize and appreciate the different perspectives that others may bring to a problem or conflict situation. Similarly, Carpenter and Kennedy (1988) set out a logical step-by-step approach which involves three distinct phases: (1) preparing a plan; (2) conducting a program; and (3) carrying out agreements. The first phase involves three different areas of concerns: analyzing the conflict; designing a strategy; and setting up a program. Carpenter and Kennedy (1988) provide a comprehensive step-by-step approach which appears to have practicality and applicability to the case at hand. Several of the basic assumptions and constructs are similar to Elangovan's (1995) on an abstract level, but Carpenter and Kennedy's (1988) model is much more applicable on a practical and intuitive level.

## **Fire-EMS Amalgamation**

The literature on the provision of fire and emergency medical services overwhelmingly supports the notion that the amalgamation of services is a logical and cost-effective way to provide service. The formal acceptance of the merger of the services is reflected in the 1991 joint resolution of the International Association of Fire Chiefs and the International Association of Fire Fighters, and in the mission statement of the United States Fire Administration (Brame, 1991). Articles written in both fire service journals (e.g., Fire Chief and Fire Engineering) and EMS journals (e.g., Journal of Emergency Medical Services and Emergency) frequently espouse the strategic and operational advantages of combined services (e.g., Bruce, 1994; Benson, 1994; Brame, 1991; Heitt, 1991).

A 1991 survey undertaken by the consulting firm Fiche and Associates, and Fire Chief Magazine, revealed that of 285 fire organizations that participated in the study only 13 percent indicated that they were not involved in any sort of EMS response (Keller, 1991). Of the remaining 87 percent, 51.9 percent indicated that they provided at least a first responder level of service. An additional 35.1 percent of respondents indicated that they had transporting services offered by a fire department. The author of the study concludes

The statistics reported in this report demonstrate that fire service organization are deeply involved in EMS operations and intend to continue this activity...By offering first responder and patient transportation services, fire organizations include pre-hospital medical care as part of their commitment to public safety (Keller, 1991:49).

Articles in support of combining fire and EMS often refer to strategic advantages and increased levels of customer service. A frequently cited advantage is the fact that fire station locations in communities typically allow an average response time of five minutes or less. This is often a much quicker response time than can be achieved by separate or private EMS organizations (Leffin, 1990). The placement of AEDs on fire apparatus, and the provisions of BLS or ALS medical training for firefighters allows for rapid intervention in medical emergencies (Keller, 1993). Rapid

intervention by fire personnel may be provided through a two-tiered system wherein an ambulance from another agency is dispatched as a backup to the fire unit, or as an entirely fire-department-based operation (Gresham, 1994).

The literature reflects that the level and extent of amalgamation of fire and emergency medical services varies widely from location to location. The success of total integration has been well documented in articles which examine cities such as Seattle (Bruce, 1994) and Phoenix (Dittmar, 1994). There are also articles documenting problems which occur through partial integration in cities such as Washington, DC. The concepts and theories drawn from the mergers and acquisitions literature may provide some insights as why some merger strategies have been successful and why others have not.

The Fire and EMS literature also contains direction on the management of conflict and the successful integration of Fire and EMS functions. Some articles which discuss the problems associated with the integration of fire and EMS call for strong leadership and direction from chiefs (Sachs, 1993; Malone, 1993). Others see the need to build in teamwork and cohesiveness at the grass-roots level (Macklin, 1991). A consistent theme through all of the articles, however, is the need to have a clear mission or vision which provides a guide to action and reference point for the resolution of disputes and difficulties.

## **PROCEDURES**

The review of the management literature on mergers and acquisitions and on conflict management comprised the first stage in the research procedure. Literature reviews were conducted using research facilities at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada. A computerized data retrieval system covering more than 2 million works was searched for material on mergers and acquisitions and on conflict management. A CD-ROM database, "Socio-file," which contains titles and abstracts from several hundred different journals was also searched for articles on mergers and acquisitions, conflict management, fire service articles, and emergency medical service articles. A request was also submitted to the Learning Resource Center at the National Emergency Training Center, and several journal articles and research papers were identified as having relevance. In addition, manual search was done of recent (the last five years) issues of trade journals pertaining to the fire service and emergency medical services.

The books and articles identified through the literature search were reviewed and scrutinized, and those that were deemed to be pertinent to the present case were summarized for inclusion in the literature review section of the paper. The second step in the procedure was to apply the theories extracted from the literature to the case at hand, namely the merger of the Edmonton Fire and Emergency Medical Services Department.



The mergers and acquisitions literature was applied through an historical analysis of the events which preceded the amalgamation (i.e., the courtship stage), and of the events which followed the amalgamation (i.e., the consummation stage). This process was facilitated by the fact that when the merger was being contemplated, the fire chief was enrolled in the *Executive Fire Officer Program* at the United States National Fire Academy, and prepared a research paper which documented the background reasons in support of the merger (Sherburne, 1992). This information was supplemented by semistructured interviews with the chief and other key stakeholders, including the manager of the former EMS department, the city manager, and other senior-level branch managers. A total of seven people were interviewed and each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes (see interview outline, Appendix C).

The conflict resolution literature was scrutinized in order to search for a model that would be readily applicable and could be used in the development of guidelines that may be used in managing conflict in the Edmonton Emergency Response Department. A further purpose for reviewing the conflict management literature was to ascertain what organizational strategies may be adopted in order for managers to effectively manage disputes and conflict associated with the merger. This aspect of the research project constituted an action research methodology.

## **RESULTS**

At the outset of this research project, four specific research problems were identified. The results of the research are organized around those four questions and are presented in turn:

1. What insights can management literature or research provide regarding the amalgamation of two organizations and the underlying reasons for conflict?

The literature review provided several key insights concerning mergers and acquisitions. Four specific propositions were identified in the literature: (1) human resources problems are inevitable during organizational amalgamations; (2) that managerial attention is typically given to strategic rather than organizational issues; (3) that mergers are different from acquisitions; and (4) that managers typically under-manage the human resource and cultural problems associated with a merger or acquisition. Each of these propositions was supported in the present case by data gathered through interviews with key organizational members who were knowledgeable regarding the amalgamation process in Edmonton.

The inevitability of human resource problems were acknowledged in the premerger discussions as described by the managers who were involved in the merger and were interviewed as part of this research project. All of the managers identified that conflict arising from differences in organizational culture were anticipated. The primary reason for this was knowledge of strife and interpersonal conflict that had

been associated with a fire/EMS merger in the neighboring city of Calgary. While all of the managers interviewed acknowledged concerns regarding potential conflict and labor relations problems, many suggested that there was a feeling that if the merger in Edmonton was approached properly these types of problems could be averted. Additionally, all of the managers indicated that there had, in fact, been fewer interpersonal conflict and labor relations difficulties than what had been anticipated in the premerger discussions.

Closely related to this issue was that of paying closer attention to strategic rather than organizational issues. All of the managers indicated that the primary motivation for the merger was the belief that improved service levels and economies of scale would be realized through the amalgamation process. Any concerns that were raised regarding human resource issues were overcome by the anticipated benefits of the amalgamation. The belief was that human resource problems could be worked out, and the primary emphasis was placed on the perceived financial and operational benefits of the amalgamation. This was supportive of the proposition advanced by Greenwood *et al.* (1994) that premerger discussions tend to focus more strongly on strategic issues than on organizational issues.

The fact that mergers are different from acquisitions was identified through the interviews as it became apparent that different players had different perceptions of what had actually taken place. Certain steps had been taken in an effort to create a true merger which would build upon the strengths of each of partners in the merger. This would create a new organization that was different and unique from either of the two constituent organizations. The creation of a new name, for example, was intended to create a new identity and avoid the problem of one organization appearing to be acquired by the other. Despite these efforts to create an equitable merger, the interviews with the various managers made it clear that the anticipated results and actual results were far different.

Two of the managers who had come from EMS originally indicated that they felt that the amalgamation was intended to be a merger but in fact had turned out to be an acquisition. One EMS manager indicated that it could in fact be viewed as a "hostile take over." Two of the managers who had come from fire originally indicated that they felt it was intended to be a merger but had turned out to be an acquisition as EMS had taken over fire. They suggested that EMS personnel were interested in acquiring all of the benefits associated with belonging to a larger department, but were not willing to give up anything in terms of identity, control, or entrenched operational procedures. It was their feeling that EMS personnel were anxious to acquire improved benefits such as uniforms, pensions, and vehicles, but were reluctant to give up any of their past practices or identity. Both the general manager and city manager viewed the amalgamation as a merger and believed that there had been a concerted effort to manage the transition and create a new organization that equally embodied the salient attributes of the two constituent organizations.

The discrepancy in the perceptions of the different managers appears to support the proposition that managers typically under-manage the human resource and cultural problems associated with a merger or acquisition. Several of the managers commented that the amalgamation had foundered as a result of a lack of clear and decisive leadership and as a result of assumptions that the problems could be worked out, and that time heals all wounds. The creation of a new name laid the symbolic groundwork to create a equitable and synergistic merger which would build on the strengths of each of the constituent organizations. However, the lack of substantive action to support the symbolic groundwork resulted in the merger being perceived in different ways by different members.

An additional concept from the mergers and acquisitions literature which is relevant to the present case is the discussion by Nahavandi and Malekzadeh (1988), and Greenwood *et al.* (1994) of the different acculturation types. Clearly the intentions of the general manager and city manager were to create a "blended culture" which is associated with a merger and involves the adoption of the strengths of each organization. In reality, however, the result has been "integration" which is associated with an acquisition and involves the employees of an acquired organization trying to maintain many of the basic assumptions, beliefs, and practices that make them unique.

As a result of the application of these concepts and propositions from the mergers and acquisitions literature several explanations may be developed to explain the underlying reasons for organizational conflict:

- a. Human resources problems are inevitable in organizational merger and acquisitions because they involve organizational change which creates stress amongst employees.
- b. Managers paid more attention to strategic issues than to human resource issues in the preamalgamation discussions and were not fully prepared to manage human resource issues.
- c. Different people had different perceptions of the amalgamation; some managers viewed it as a merger, while others viewed it as an acquisition, creating a discrepancy in expectations and actions and leading to conflict.
- d. Managers tended to under-manage the merger process, thus allowing for differing views and perceptions to emerge and creating the potential for conflict.
- e. The enculturation process associated with acquisitions is different from that associated with mergers. Different perceptions of the amalgamation process created different views of the type of enculturation to be expected.

With this basic understanding of the possible reasons for organizational conflict to arise during the course of the amalgamation process, our attention is now turned to the second and third research questions that were addressed in this project:

2. What methods or strategies for conflict resolution and conflict management are described in the management literature?
3. Which of the theories or models described in the literature can be adapted to the emergency response industry in order to provide a framework for conflict management in the Edmonton Emergency Response Department?

The academic literature on conflict management is somewhat fragmented, and is primarily descriptive rather prescriptive. One of the few practical and prescriptive models for conflict management that was discovered was that of Elangovan (1995). Unfortunately, the model and the theory are extremely difficult to explain to the average person, and it is highly questionable as to whether they would be within the comprehension of the district chiefs or EMS supervisors.

Carpenter and Kennedy (1988), also provide a practical approach to managing public disputes. Their approach is spelled out in a step-by-step manner, and appears to have the most practical significance of any of the theories or models reviewed. Practical articles on conflict management, and on specific applications to the emergency service industry were found in the emergency services literature. These articles tended to focus more on general precepts and guidelines than on specific guides to action. Based on the literature review, it was established that the Carpenter and Kennedy (1988) model could be adopted in order to develop a practical model for conflict resolution for use in the Edmonton Emergency Response Department.

Other concepts from the conflict management literature were found to have relevance to the present case. For example, Pondy's (1967) model of conflict episodes described three antecedents to conflict: (1) competition over scarce resources; (2) individual or subunit efforts to achieve (or in this case maintain) independence; and (3) differences between goals held by different individuals and/or subunits. The interviews with the different managers made it apparent that three of these antecedent conditions existed in the Emergency Response Department.

The final research question that was addressed was

4. What organizational strategies should be pursued in order to facilitate the amalgamation process and assist managers in their role as conflict managers and dispute resolvers?

Based on the model proposed by Carpenter and Kennedy, guidelines may be developed to train managers in the effective management of day-to-day conflict situations. There are four important elements that training for line managers should include. They are the following components:

1. Background to the problem: this should involve meeting on neutral ground to discuss the problem as presented by employees, and developing a strategy to gather the facts and listen to employees in a congenial and equitable manner; district chiefs and supervisors should be trained to always meet with each other and develop a strategy prior to entering a hostile or potential sensitive work site where conflict is present.
2. Understanding the problem: line supervisors should be trained to listen to problems in a nonjudgmental way and to provide leadership, compassion, and understanding when dealing with employees who are involved in conflict situations.
3. Researching the problem: line supervisors should be trained as to the data retrieval capabilities in the department and should be trained in research methods and data analysis techniques in order that they may abstract meaning from the data and use it to analyze the problem and formulate a solution.
4. Developing and implementing a resolution: line supervisors should be trained in creative problem-solving, and in techniques for monitoring and managing the implementation of solutions; training in this area should include specific direction and support from senior management as to the mission and direction of the organization.

## **DISCUSSION**

The historical analysis conducted in this project through document review and interviews with key players in the merger and in the ongoing operation of the department suggested that much work is required at the senior management level in order for a conflict resolution strategy to be successful at the line manager level. Conflict in the Emergency Response Department may be a symptomatic problem rather than a root problem in and of itself. The root cause of the conflict appears to be the lack of a common understanding and shared vision of what the amalgamation means to the organization and what the common direction of the organization should be. There is a lack of consensus among the senior managers as to the purpose of the amalgamation, the strengths of the amalgamation, and even the type of amalgamation (is it a merger or acquisition?).

Clearly much of the current confusion results from circumstances that were beyond the control of the management team. As with any municipal department, the management team takes direction from City Council. In the premerger discussion, both the city manager and general manager believed that a fully integrated, dual role, cross-trained department was the best approach in terms of service quality and efficiency. They were not, however, able to garner the political will to proceed on that basis, and this resulted in an amalgamation strategy which was different from that envisioned by those who would ultimately manage the organization. As with many aspects of managerial life, a compromise was reached. A partially integrated department, while not the best solution, was still seen as having advantages over two separate and distinct departments.

There were also some indications that political meddling has compromised the ability of managers to create consensus and build a new identity. For example, the selection of a new name which did not include either of the former names was a deliberate strategy designed to create a new and fresh identity and to not favor one department over the other. Much time and energy was devoted to gaining employee input regarding the design of a new crest which would provide a unified identity and a symbolic representation of the new department. Sometime during the premerger negotiations, however, assurances had been given to the paramedics that they would be able to maintain their identity and wear their old shoulder flashes. Thus, the efforts to build a unified identity were compromised in that some employees would be required to wear the new crest and others would not.

Similarly, in an effort to address concerns from the medical community regarding the level of priority that would be given to EMS under the new department structure, a commitment was made to complete the construction of a number of new ambulance stations that were at the proposal stage at the time of the merger. The construction of these stations, which were to house EMS exclusively, and were proximal to existing fire stations, defied the logic of the merger in the minds of many of the employees. On the one hand they were being told there was economy and efficiency to be achieved by working together, and on the other hand separate facilities were being built. Several of the managers interviewed commented that one of the perceived benefits to EMS through the merger was an improvement in the quality of their quarters. Prior to the amalgamation many of the EMS facilities were substandard in terms of quality and amenities. The fire stations on the other hand were well built and well equipped. The fact that EMS had the ability to operate out of any of the fire stations yet still proceeded with the construction of new stations which were exclusively EMS led many of the fire people to believe that EMS was acting out of greed and self-interest rather than in the interest of the efficient use of public funds and provision of an efficient service to the public.

While political interference in various aspects of the amalgamation could be seen as influencing many aspects of the merger the department management team created some of the problems as well. For example, when asked about a

communication plan to inform employees of the details of the merger all of the managers acknowledged a oversight on the part of management in that regard. It appears that the members of the management team were looking to one another to take charge and provide direction. The general manager was reluctant to interfere in the branches and looked to the branch managers to provide leadership and direction. But their efforts were typically focused on their own area of responsibility and not on the overall department. There were many details of the merger that required clarification and/or direction from the top, and that did not appear to be forthcoming. When there are different ways of accomplishing tasks, and they are entrenched in different cultures and traditions, someone has to eventually make the decision on which way to do things. It appears that the person who ultimately has to provide the leadership and direction regarding issues related to the merger will have to be the general manager.

In the two articles in the mergers and acquisitions literature that provided specific direction to managers the importance of leadership and communication were highly emphasized. Schweiger and Denisi (1991) suggest that realistic previews and open, honest communication are key ingredients for successful mergers. Clearly it is incumbent upon the senior management team to provide that type of leadership and direction.

Similarly, Olie (1994) found that leadership, appropriate organizational structure, and compatibility of merger motives were important factors for the success of a merger. These are all areas that fall within the domain of managerial control. During the merger process it is the leader who must work both symbolically and substantively in these three areas to provide the leadership and direction required. In the present case there appeared to be an incompatibility of both motives and perceptions among different branch managers. It appeared that only the leader was in a position to deal with those discrepancies and establish common ground and direction for all.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Through the literature search conducted in this project, articles were discovered in the mergers and acquisitions literature and in the conflict management literature that provide insight and understanding into the problems associated with managing a merger in a large organization. Based on propositions found in the mergers and acquisitions literature several recommendations can be made regarding the manner by which the merger of fire and EMS organizations can be managed effectively. Organizations should appreciate that conflict is inevitable, and should plan to provide training and development of staff prior to the commencement of the merger. In the present case the training for managers is being developed at a juncture which is 18 months into the merger and is somewhat reactive. In other jurisdictions where mergers are being considered, training could be provided in advance in a more proactive manner.





The mergers and acquisitions literature also provided guidance regarding the aspects of organizational mergers. In the present case, as in others discussed in the literature, premerger discussions focused on the strategic aspects of amalgamation rather than on the organizational elements. The lesson for other organizations is to carefully consider the "human side" of the merger and provide training and direction to employees throughout the organization so that they are prepared to face the types of human resource problems that are inevitable in any merger.

A final recommendation that may be drawn from the mergers and acquisitions literature and the present case, is the need to explicitly clarify whether the amalgamation is a merger or an acquisition, and to provide employees with clear direction and reliable information concerning what is going to happen and why it is going to happen. Leadership and direction is imperative in this regard in order to build a vision and a dream for the new organization and to ensure that managers and employees share that vision.

Specific recommendations may also be drawn from the conflict management literature. In terms of the Edmonton Emergency Response Department specifically, it is recommended that the step-by-step conflict management process developed by Carpenter and Kennedy (1988) be reviewed by the ERD Academy and developed into a customized training program for district chiefs and EMS supervisors. Specific components that should be provided in a training program were discussed in the results section of this paper. This may be used to provide direction to Academy staff as to the type of training that will be required in order to make line managers more effective in their jobs managing conflict on an ongoing basis. Finally, the development of a strategy for conflict resolution for line managers is contingent upon the senior management providing the vision, mission, and leadership that is required to ensure that the merger proceeds in a timely manner and leads to the realization of the economies of scale and improved service to the public that were anticipated at the outset of the merger discussions. In fairness to the management team, this process has already been put into motion, as a management consultant was engaged in January to work with the team and facilitate the development of a mission and goals. It is recommended that this process be given top priority at the senior management level in order that clear direction may be established and that the mission may be used as a point of reference when analyzing and managing disputes between individuals and subunits.

During the independent interviews conducted with senior managers in the department it was unanimously held that the merger had achieved or surpassed expectations, in terms of the benefits of the merger, and that there had been fewer major operational problems than had been expected. This is a tribute to the talents and abilities of the management team to handle crisis management. However, it would be a mistake to believe that all is under control. It may have been beneficial not to have clearly defined mission and goals initially, as this allowed for some variance in the ideas held by different managers. The long-term success and viability of the

organization, however, is going to require that the mission and goals be clarified and that different branch managers buy into the mission of the merged organization. The success of the organization will ultimately hinge on the ability of the management team to provide a vision, leadership, and direction in building a new and improved organization which is cost-effective and responsive to the needs of its customers, shareholders, and stakeholders.



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# **APPENDIX A**





**EMERGENCY RESPONSE DEPARTMENT  
Organization Chart**



## **APPENDIX B**



**FIGURE 1**

**Managerial Dispute Intervention Strategies**

- MCS Means Control Strategy:** Manager intervenes in the dispute by influencing the process of resolution (i.e., facilitates interaction, assist in communication, explains one disputant's views to another, clarifies issues, lays down rules for dealing with the dispute, maintains order during talks) but does not attempt to dictate or impose a resolution (though he/she might suggest solutions); the final decision is left to the disputants; high on process control but low on outcome control; e.g., mediation, conciliation.
- ECS Ends Control Strategy:** Manager intervenes in the dispute by influencing the outcome of the resolution (i.e., takes full control of the final resolution, decides what the final decision would be, imposes the resolution on the disputants) but does not attempt to influence the process; the disputants have control over what information is presented and how it is presented; high on outcome control but low on process control; e.g., arbitration, adjudication, adversarial intervention.
- LCS Low Control Strategy:** Manager does not intervene actively in resolving the dispute; either urges the parties to settle the dispute on their own or merely stays away from the dispute; low on both process and outcome control; e.g., encouraging or telling the parties to negotiate or settle the dispute by themselves, providing impetus.
- FCS Full Control Strategy:** Manager intervenes in the dispute by influencing the process and outcome (i.e., decides what information is to be presented and how it should be presented and also decides on the final resolution); asks the disputants specific questions about the dispute to obtain information and imposes a resolution; manager has full control of the resolution of the dispute; high on both process and outcome control; e.g., inquisitorial intervention, autocratic intervention.
- PCS Part Control Strategy:** Manager intervenes in the dispute by sharing control over the process and outcome with the disputants (i.e., manager and disputants jointly agree on the process of resolution as well as strive for a consensus on the settlement decision); works with the disputants to help them arrive at a solution by facilitating interaction, assisting in communication, discussing the issues, etc.; in addition, takes an active role in evaluating options, recommending solutions, persuading the disputants to accept them, and pushing for a settlement; moderate on managerial process and outcome control; e.g., group problem-solving, med-arb.

## **FIGURE 2**

### **Rules Underlying the Model**

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#### **1. The Dispute Importance Rule**

If the importance of the dispute is high then the intervention strategy chosen should give the manager some degree of control on either or both dimensions. Accordingly, LCS is eliminated from the feasible set.

#### **2. The Time Pressure Rule**

If the time pressure associated with settling the dispute is high then the intervention strategy chosen should give the manager some degree of process control. Accordingly, LCS and ECS are eliminated from the feasible set.

#### **3. The Dispute Rule**

If the dispute between subordinates is a DOP dispute then the intervention strategy chosen should give the manager some degree of outcome control. Accordingly, LCS and MCS are eliminated from the feasible set. The only exception to the rule is when time pressure is low, commitment probability is low but disputant orientation is high (MCS is the option). If the dispute between subordinates is a DOS dispute then the manager should allow the subordinates some degree of control on either or both dimensions (process & outcome). Accordingly, FCS is eliminated from the feasible set. The only exception to the rule is when time pressure is high, commitment probability is high, and the disputants are not likely to interact frequently in the future.

#### **4. The Relationship Rule**

If the subordinates (disputants) are likely to have a high frequency of interaction in the future, then the intervention strategy chosen should give the subordinates some degree of outcome control. Accordingly, FCS and ECS are eliminated from the feasible set. The only exception to the rule is when time pressure is low, commitment probability is high, and disputant orientation is low (ECS is the option).

#### **5. The Commitment Rule**

If the probability that the subordinates (disputants) would be committed to a settlement imposed by the manager is low, then the intervention strategy chosen should give subordinates some degree of outcome control. Accordingly, FCS and ECS are eliminated from the feasible set.

## **FIGURE 2 (cont'd)**

### **Rules Underlying the Model**

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#### **6. The Disputant Orientation Rule**

If the status of the dispute based on the five rules described above suggests choosing intervention strategies that yield full outcome control to subordinates (disputants), the manager should use disputant orientation as the final criterion. If the disputant orientation is low, the intervention strategy chosen should give the manager some degree of outcome control. Accordingly, LCS and MCS are eliminated from the feasible set. If the disputant orientation is high, the intervention strategy chosen should give subordinates some degree of outcome control. Accordingly, FCS and ECS are eliminated from the feasible set.

#### **7. The Priority Rule**

If the status of the dispute based on the six rules described above suggests more than one intervention strategy as being equally effective, the following priority conditions must be observed to select one strategy. For high importance disputes: (a) when time pressure is low and commitment probability is low, the manager should choose that intervention strategy that allows him/her maximum process control (so that by ensuring an orderly and fair process the commitment can be increased); (b) when time pressure is low and commitment probability is high, the manager should select that strategy that allows him/her maximum outcome control (so that the best interests of the organization are always protected) while giving the disputants at least some control over the resolution; (c) when time pressure is high, the manager should choose that intervention strategy that requires the least amount of time to resolve the dispute without endangering commitment. For low importance disputes, the manager should select the strategy that requires the least amount of resources (skills, time, etc.).

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### **FIGURE 3**

#### **Managerial Intervention Strategy Selection Model**

(from Elangovan, 1995)

- |    |   |
|----|---|
| DI | How important is this dispute to the effective functioning of the organization?   |
| TP | How important is it to resolve the dispute as quickly as possible?  |
| ND | Does the dispute concern the interpretation of existing rules, procedures, and arrangements or changing of existing rules, procedures, and arrangements?  |
| NR | What is the expected frequency of future work-related interactions between the disputants?  |
| CP | If you were to impose a settlement on your subordinates (disputants), what is the probability that they would be committed to it?   |
| DO | What is the orientation of the disputants? (i.e., if you were to let your subordinates (disputants) settle the dispute, what is the probability that they would come to an organizationally compatible settlement?) |

## **APPENDIX C**



## **EFOP Research Project Interview Questions**

1. Please outline for me, to the best of your recollection, the factors which were considered as supporting the amalgamation of the Fire and EMS departments (benefits).
2. Were there other factors considered which were viewed as not supporting the amalgamation?
3. Mergers and acquisitions may be seen as conceptually different types of amalgamation. Which type of amalgamation do you view the combination of Edmonton Fire and EMS as being?
4. In your estimation has the amalgamation to date achieved the strategic objectives you anticipated?
5. Have there been positive aspects of the amalgamation which exceed your original expectations?
6. Have there been negative aspects to the amalgamation which were either anticipated or unanticipated?
7. What steps have been taken to manage problems and difficulties associated with the amalgamation?
8. Was a communication strategy developed to inform employees of the details of the amalgamation?
9. If you could turn back the clock and start the amalgamation over, would you do anything differently?
10. Can you provide any advice to others who are contemplating amalgamations of fire and emergency medical services?

